FOREWORD

Fukushima's Special Message

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The Fukushima nuclear energy disaster was by no means the largest we have encountered. The Chernobyl meltdown twenty-five years earlier retains that distinction. But Fukushima Daiichi was unique in two ways: It revealed the vulnerability of nuclear power to geophysical events such as earthquakes and tsunamis. And it provided a powerful psychological association to the use of a nuclear weapon on an inhabited city, a city that happened to be just about five hundred miles away.

When people in or close to Fukushima—and many quite far away—identified themselves with Hiroshima survivors, they were asserting not only their proximity to the atom-bombed city but their sense that they had been subjected to the same highly destructive, and in many ways mysterious, technology. Fukushima, that is, rendered false the constant assertion on the part of advocates that nuclear power was entirely different from, or even had nothing to do with, nuclear weapons.

Atomic bomb survivors I interviewed in Hiroshima were profoundly fearful of what I came to call “invisible contamination.” Within hours or days or weeks after the bomb fell, many experienced or observed in others grotesque symptoms that included severe diarrhea and weakness as well as bleeding from all the body orifices and into the skin (the dreaded “purple spots”), often leading to quick and terrifying death. For those who survived, the fear of invisible contamination extended indefinitely as, over years and decades, evidence accumulated of an increased incidence of a variety of cancers, and even of the potential transmission of radiation effects to the next generation.

People in and around Fukushima did not experience acute radiation symptoms. But high radiation levels were recorded, leading to extremely difficult evacuations that took their own heavy toll on the health of many people. And researchers project future vulnerability to different forms of cancer. One writer observed a “fallout of fear,” and psychiatrists recorded “subclinical problems” that, while not requiring hospitalization, greatly affected everyday life.

The remarkable creation by a group of women who had no scientific background of a reliable “mother’s radiation laboratory” was surely an admirable expression of civil society. But it also reflected the deep distrust of the government and nuclear plant spokespeople, a distrust earned by their distortions and lies in minimizing or denying dangers to the population.

That constellation of behavior, involving widespread nuclear fear and denial of danger by authorities, has been present in every breakdown of nuclear reactors anywhere and must be seen as characterizing all situations involving radiation danger from nuclear technology. The same constellation has been observed at Hanford, Washington, in connection with the nuclear waste from the production of the Nagasaki bomb; in Rocky Flats, Colorado, after decades of nuclear weapons production; and at test sites at Nevada and elsewhere after US soldiers were exposed to radiation following atomic bomb tests.

The Three Mile Island reactor meltdown is a revealing example as well. It came to be seen as borderline in terms of actual radiation danger, but people I interviewed there saw themselves as having been exposed to a hidden poison that could strike them down at any time, and they had their own distrust of the assurances of authorities.

We may say that any significant exposure to radiation can create, psychologically, nothing less than a permanent encounter with death.

Moreover, there is no getting rid of the poison. Even when nuclear reactors are closed down for safety or economic reasons, as was the case with the Pilgrim reactor in Plymouth, Massachusetts, and the Vermont Yankee reactor, the accumulated waste must remain at the site, always dangerous and virtually immortal. After four decades of trying, we have been unable to develop safe permanent repositories for nuclear waste. That is both because the waste is so difficult to contain safely and because people don’t want the waste in their neighborhood. There is also the recognition, not lost on people who live near nuclear plants, that the reactors could lend themselves to potential weaponization—which in turn makes them a tempting target for terrorists.

The meltdown at Fukushima Daiichi was a dreadful event, but it can have great value to us in its puncturing of the nuclear mystique. That mystique has

been exploited from the time of the administration of President Dwight Eisenhower, with its vision of “atoms for peace” that embraced the technology that threatens the human future to instead provide endless amounts of cheap energy for everyone. That vision in turn goes back to the days of Marie Curie, the pioneering nuclear physicist who, like so many others, was enchanted with radiation—and who died from the effects it had upon her.

For solving our energy problems, proponents still embrace nuclear technology as “clean,” in contrast with the dirtiness of oil, natural gas, and coal. But Fukushima makes clear that nuclear energy, with its invisible contamination from irradiation and dangerously undisposable waste, may be considered the dirtiest of all.